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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON LAGOS STATE AIDS CONTROL AGENCY

EFFORTS

¶1. Summary: Lagos State AIDS Control Agency (LSACA) continues to work with 11 state ministries, 20 local governments, and over 400 organizations to reduce the incidence and mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS in Lagos State. Achievements in 2004 included the expansion of voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) centers at 13 public medical facilities and establishment of local AIDS control agencies in all local government areas. LSACA Chief Executive Officer Dr. Aderemi Desalu believes it is time to move beyond addressing stigma and focus on increasing personal responsibility for being tested and taking appropriate action. In 2005, LSACA, with its partners, will develop its next five-year plan. The agency also will push for a state HIV/AIDS bill and will explore adding anti-retroviral treatment to the services provided by VCT centers. End summary.

¶2. LSACA continues to work with 11 state ministries, 20 local governments, and over 400 organizations to fight HIV/AIDS in Lagos. Eight work groups support agency staff in coordinating activities: information, education and communication; voluntary counseling and testing; primary care and support; blood and blood safety; justice and human rights; youth; resource mobilization; and monitoring and evaluation. LSACA's primary international partners are Family Health International (FHI), the World Bank, UNICEF, ActionAid, and the Society for Family Health (SFH).

2004 Achievements: VCT Scale-Up and Local Agency Establishment

¶3. In 2004, LSACA made progress in several areas. With support from USAID and in collaboration with FHI, the agency conducted sensitization workshops for the eleven collaborating state ministries and for local government staffs. The Lagos State Ministry of Health, FHI, and LSACA collaborated to improve voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) centers at 13 public hospitals and health centers. LSACA worked with local governments to establish a local AIDS control agency (LACA) in the 20 local government areas in the state. Collaboration with the World Bank focused on civil society organizations (CSOs), including training 450 staff members of CSOs in community mobilization, proposal and report writing, financial reporting, and monitoring and evaluation. UNICEF efforts focused on prevention of mother-to-child transmission programs in three hospitals, while ActionAid and SFH engaged in a range of activities from policy workshops to condom distribution. Working with the Lagos State Traditional Medicines Board, LSACA trained 250 traditional medicine practitioners and 60 traditional birth attendants. (In addition to FHI and SFH, the USG also funds Hope Worldwide, Community Participation for Action in the Social Sciences (COMPASS), and the Nigerian Business Community Against AIDS (NIBUCAA) through USAID; StopAIDS through CDC, and SMARTWork through the Department of Labor. All of these partners are collaborating to provide HIV/AIDS services under the Emergency Plan in Lagos State with the direction of LSACA.)

Result of Efforts: Reduced Stigma

¶4. Now in the final year of LSACA's first five-year plan (2000-2005), Desalu claimed "amazing change" in awareness and stigma since LSACA's inception. LSACA reported over 90 percent of Lagos residents are now aware of HIV/AIDS, compared to under 40 percent in 2000. As an example of decreased stigma, Desalu noted that five years ago, people living with HIV/AIDS would cover their faces in public interviews; now a network of people living with HIV/AIDS exists to openly combat

discrimination. Other progress Desalu noted was passage of a law making it an offense to transfuse unscreened blood and the six-fold reduction in the cost of anti-retroviral treatment (ART) during this five-year span, with hopes of a further drop to N1000 (\$7.50) per month in 2005.

Next Hurdle: "Personal Conviction"

15. Believing that Lagos is largely beyond the problem of stigma, Desalu said significant work remains to be done in regard to "personal conviction." Lagos needs to progress to the point where individuals are concerned enough to be tested, confident that help is available, and aware that earlier diagnosis is better. Not discouraged by the still low level of use of VCT centers, Desalu said the key is to have the institutions and structures in place and continue spreading the message consistently that resources are available. The basic message he seeks to spread is "you can know your HIV status; it's good to know your HIV status; here's where you can be tested; and if needed, here's where you can get help." Desalu noted that progress has been made and continues in this area. He observed that five years ago, most people would question the value of knowing their HIV status; why be tested just to receive bad news? Then VCT centers emerged to provide some support and assistance, and now ART is becoming available, providing some hope and a reason to be tested.

Underway for 2005: Development
of Next 5-Year Plan

16. Many activities reported for 2004 are ongoing, but Desalu also noted several new and future efforts. LSACA is working with partners to develop the next five-year plan. LSACA is pursuing "the three ones" approach: one plan, one coordination system, and one monitoring and evaluation system. LSACA will soon complete a report on the use of VCT centers in the state, which will also include information on prevalence rates observed at the centers. Efforts of the Justice and Human Rights Work Group currently focus on working with the Lagos House of Assembly and Ministry of Justice to pass an HIV/AIDS bill. As a possible new activity for 2005, Desalu said he would like to add ART to the services provided at VCT centers.

Comment

17. Though significant progress in fighting stigma has been made and more people living with HIV/AIDS are open about their status, stigma remains a significant problem in Lagos State. In the workplace, in particular, few people with HIV/AIDS are open about their status for fear of discrimination. However, as stigma-fighting efforts continue, the state will benefit from LSACA's focus on other areas.